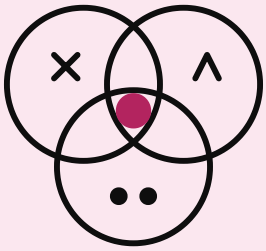
Theory

Self-determination theory

A theory of motivation according to which people engage in what they do of their own accord when three basic needs are met: autonomy, competence and relatedness.



In Spanish
Teoría de la autodeterminación

Origin
Deci and Ryan (1985)

What problem it addresses

It explains why rewards and pressure can take away the desire to do something that used to be done for enjoyment.

Principles

Autonomy
Feeling that you choose what you do.

Competence
Feeling capable and that you are improving.

Relatedness
Feeling connected to other people.

An example

An illustrative example: a language-learning app wants people to practice every day.

Pressure and rewards



Insistent notifications and points for each lesson, even if you don't learn. **You practice for the points.**

Choice and progress



You choose what to practice, see how much you improve and talk with other people. **You practice because you want to.**

When the three needs are met, motivation lasts longer than motivation that depends on a reward.

Why it happens

1

Doing something for enjoyment depends on feeling free and capable.

2

A controlling reward changes the reason: we no longer do it for enjoyment.

3

If the reward disappears, so does the desire.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

Check whether your product lets people choose, shows real progress and connects them with others.

✗ Avoid

Basing all motivation on points, streaks and notifications that compel.

Don't fall for it

Rewards aren't bad in themselves: the problem appears when they control instead of inform.

128 studies

What the research says

Tangible rewards announced in advance reduced interest in continuing the task; praise increased it (Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 1999).

●●● **Solid evidence.** The effect depends on the type of reward and how it is given, and other authors have debated its size.

Connections

Used in

- Game design
- Learning design
- Behavioral design

Related to

- Gamification
- Fogg Behavior Model
- Octalysis
- Bartle's player types

Authors and works

1985	**Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan**	Formulated the theory from their experiments on intrinsic motivation.
2000	**Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci**	Summarized the three basic needs and their link to well-being.
1999	**Edward L. Deci, Richard Koestner and Richard M. Ryan**	Analyzed 128 experiments on the effect of rewards on motivation.

Sources

Original sources

- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. Plenum.

Academic reviews

- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist, 55(1), 68–78. View source (https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68)
- Deci, E. L., Koestner, R., & Ryan, R. M. (1999). A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. Psychological Bulletin, 125(6), 627–668. View source (https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.6.627)

Last reviewed: October 25, 2026

Atlas público de diseño, de Adriana Ojeda. Texto e ilustraciones bajo licencia CC BY 4.0.